

CLAIMS

1 1. A method of charging a payment transaction to a customer, comprising the steps
2 of:
3 (a) soliciting from said customer a plurality of payment instruments;
4 (b) obtaining from said customer information identifying at least two payment
5 instruments, where:
6 (i) said customer is willing to allow said payment transaction to be processed
7 using any of said identified payment instruments,
8 (ii) said identified instruments utilize different funding sources, and
9 (iii) where each of said identified payment instruments is usable for processing
10 said payment transaction in its entirety;
11 (c) submitting information regarding said identified payment instruments to a
12 computer-implemented transaction evaluator configured to automatically select
13 one of said identified payment instruments based on the relative economic utility
14 of said identified payment instruments;
15 (d) receiving from said transaction evaluator a selection of one of said identified
16 payment instruments;
17 (e) notifying said customer which of said payment instruments was selected; and
18 (f) receiving funds for the payment of said transaction using said selected payment
19 instrument.

1 2. The method of claim 1 where, in said step (c), said relative economic utility is that
2 to a merchant performing at least said step (a).

1 3. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step prior to at least said step (f)
2 of electronically transmitting to a payment network data identifying at least said selected
3 payment instrument and the amount of said transaction.

1 4. The method of claim 3 comprising the additional step after at least said step (d) of
2 receiving confirmation from said payment network that said payment transaction was
3 processed successfully.

1 5. The method of claim 1 where said step (e) includes obtaining from said customer
2 explicit authorization to process said payment transaction using said selected payment
3 instrument.

1 6. The method of claim 5 where said explicit authorization includes a signature.

1 7. The method of claim 1 where said steps (a), (b), and (e) are performed via
2 electronic communication with said customer.

1 8. The method of claim 7 where said electronic communication includes using an
2 automated telephony-based response system.

1 9. The method of claim 7 where at least said step (a) includes sending a form over
2 the Internet to a web browser operated by said customer.

1 10. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step after said step (c) of said
2 transaction evaluator comparing estimated transaction benefit values associated with each
3 of said identified payment instruments and selecting the one of said payment instruments
4 with the greatest transaction benefit.

1 11. The method of claim 1 comprising the further steps after at least said step (b) of:
2 (i) transmitting information about said payment transaction to a computer authorized
3 to represent the issuer of at least one of said identified payment instruments, and
4 (ii) receiving in response from said computer a first offer describing the terms under
5 which said issuer is willing to process said payment transaction.

1 12. The method of claim 11 where said offer must meet a predefined minimum
2 amount for said issuer to be granted priority in receiving said payment transaction.

1 13. The method of claim 11 comprising the further steps of:

2 (i) receiving from the issuer of a second of said identified payment instruments a
3 second offer;
4 (ii) identifying which of said first offer and said second offer provides a greater
5 transaction benefit; and
6 (iii) accepting the more favorable of said offers.

1 14. The method of claim 13 comprising the further step of computing the terms for
2 said payment transaction as a function of both said first offer and said second offer.

1 15. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional steps after at least said step (c)
2 of:
3 (i) conducting an automatic electronic auction among the issuers of said identified
4 payment instruments;
5 (ii) identifying a winner of said auction; and
6 (iii) selecting the one of said identified payment instruments issued by said winner.

1 16. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step of updating records
2 containing payment instrument selection criteria.

1 17. The method of claim 16 where said records include a list of payment processing
2 terms for payment instruments from preferred issuers.

1 18. The method of claim 16 where said records include:
2 (i) routing tables containing communications network information corresponding to a
3 plurality of payment instrument issuers; and
4 (ii) software for analyzing responses received from said plurality of issuers.

1 19. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step after at least said step (c) of
2 receiving from an issuer of at least one of said identified payment instruments an
3 incentive based on which of said identified payment instruments is selected.

1 20. The method of claim 19 where said incentive includes a payment guarantee to
2 accept risk associated with said transaction.

1 21. The method of claim 19 where said incentive includes a payment for processing
2 said transaction using a payment instrument from an issuer other than the issuer
3 providing said incentive.

1 22. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step after said step (c) of
2 analyzing and comparing the risk associated with at least two of said identified payment
3 instruments.

1 23. The method of claim 22 including using information from at least one of said
2 identified payment instruments to estimate risk associated with another of said identified
3 payment instruments.

1 24. The method of claim 1 where said step (a) includes offering an incentive to said
2 customer for supplying said plurality of payment instruments.

1 25. The method of claim 24 where said incentive depends on the economic utility of
2 said payment instruments.

1 26. The method of claim 1 where said step (f) is performed before said step (e).

1 27. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step after at least said step (b) of
2 obtaining transaction authorizations for the amount of said payment transaction from
3 issuers of each of said identified payment instruments.

1 28. The method of claim 1 where said transaction evaluator is operated by a merchant
2 performing at least said step (a).

1 29. The method of claim 1 where said transaction evaluator is located in a server
2 connected to the Internet.

1 30. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step prior to said step (a) of:
2 • receiving an order from said customer;
3 • based on said order, determining that it is advantageous to request multiple
4 payment instruments from said customer;
5 and comprising the additional steps after said step (f) of:
6 • receiving a second order from a second customer;
7 • based on said second order, determining that it is not advantageous to request
8 multiple payment instruments from said second customer;
9 • soliciting from said second customer a single payment instrument; and
10 • receiving from said second customer information describing a single payment
11 instrument.

1 31. The method of claim 1 performed using a computer staffed by an operator
2 communicating via telephone with said customer who is placing an order.

1 32. The method of claim 1 where said solicited payment instruments are of different
2 types.

1 33. The method of claim 1 where said identified payment instruments are credit cards
2 from different issuers.

1 34. The method of claim 1 comprising the additional step of updating records in a
2 computer-based accounting system to reflect an amount due from the issuer of said
3 selected payment instrument.

1 35. An apparatus for charging a payment transaction to a customer, comprising:
2 (a) means for soliciting a plurality of payment instruments;

3 (b) means for obtaining information identifying at least two payment instruments,
4 where:
5 (i) said customer is willing to allow said payment transaction to be processed
6 using any of said identified payment instruments,
7 (ii) said identified instruments utilize different funding sources, and
8 (iii) where each of said identified payment instruments is usable for processing
9 said payment transaction in its entirety;
10 (c) means for submitting information regarding said identified payment instruments
11 to a computer-implemented transaction evaluator configured to automatically
12 select one of said identified payment instruments based on the relative economic
13 utility of said identified payment instruments;
14 (d) means for receiving from said transaction evaluator a selection of one of said
15 identified payment instruments; and
16 (e) means for outputting which of said payment instruments was selected.
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1 36. The apparatus of claim 35 where said elements (a), (b), and (e) are configured for
2 electronic communication with said customer using an automated telephony-based
3 response system.

1 37. The apparatus of claim 36 further comprising means for connecting to the
2 Internet.

1 38. The apparatus of claim 35 wherein said transaction evaluator is configured to
2 compare estimated transaction benefit values associated with each of said identified
3 payment instruments and select the one of said payment instruments with the greatest
4 transaction benefit.

1 39. The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising:

2 (i) means for transmitting information about said payment transaction to a computer
3 authorized to represent the issuer of at least one of said identified payment
4 instruments, and
5 (ii) means for receiving in response from said computer a first offer describing the
6 terms under which said issuer is willing to process said payment transaction.

1 40. The apparatus of claim 39 further comprising:

- 2 (i) means for receiving from the issuer of a second of said identified payment
3 instruments a second offer;
- 4 (ii) means for identifying which of said first offer and said second offer provides a
5 greater transaction benefit; and
- 6 (iii) means for accepting the more favorable of said offers.

1 41. The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising:

2 (i) means for conducting an automatic electronic auction among the issuers of said
3 identified payment instruments;
4 (ii) means for identifying a winner of said auction; and
5 (iii) means for selecting the one of said identified payment instruments issued by said
6 winner.

1 42. The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising a memory containing:

- 2 (i) payment instrument selection criteria;
- 3 (ii) payment processing terms for payment instruments from preferred issuers;
- 4 (iii) communications network information corresponding to a plurality of payment
- 5 instrument issuers; and
- 6 (iv) software for analyzing responses received from said plurality of issuers.

1 43. The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising means for receiving from an issuer
2 of at least one of said identified payment instruments an incentive based on which of said
3 identified payment instruments is selected.

1 44. The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising means for analyzing and comparing
2 the risk associated with at least two of said identified payment instruments, and for using
3 information from at least one of said identified payment instruments to estimate risk
4 associated with another of said identified payment instruments.

1 45. The apparatus of claim 35 where said element (a) includes means for offering an
2 incentive to said customer for supplying said plurality of payment instruments.

1 46. The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising
2 means for:

- 3 • receiving an order from said customer;
- 4 • based on said order, determining that it is advantageous to request multiple
5 payment instruments from said customer in said element (a); and

6 means for:

- 7 • receiving a second order from a second customer;
- 8 • based on said second order, determining that it is not advantageous to request
9 multiple payment instruments from said second customer;
- 10 • soliciting from said second customer a single payment instrument; and
- 11 • receiving from said second customer information describing a single payment
12 instrument.

1 47. The apparatus of claim 35 implemented as a computer staffed by an operator
2 communicating via telephone with said customer who is placing an order.

1 48. The apparatus of claim 35 wherein said solicited payment instruments are of
2 different types.

1 49. The apparatus of claim 35 further comprising a computer-based accounting
2 system having records updateable to reflect an amount due from the issuer of said
3 selected payment instrument.